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GESTURE AND SCENERY IN MODERN OPERA

By JOHN PALMER

IN discussing the modern production of Opera it is unnecessary to go beyond Wagner. Wagner, who left nothing as he found it, not only started the producers upon a new career, he also provided them with a philosophy which purported to raise a respectable handicraft to the level of a deep, hieratic mystery. We find in Wagner's "Opera and Drama" a clearer suggestion of that shadow-show towards which Mr. Gordon-Craig is now groping than is contained in any of the modern books. In stage-craft, as in music and song, Wagner, who simply sets out to prove that his own dramas were the only possible dramas, proved more than he was aware of. His deep discussion of the function of gesture and stage representation in opera still remains the most convenient point from which to approach the most modern developments.

"Opera and Drama" is perhaps the greatest piece of special pleading in literature. Those critics who have been content to exclaim against its portentous, hopeless and needless difficulty—who see in Wagner's prose works little more than a deplorable evidence of the author's pugnacity and conceit—have chosen to deny themselves much light and wisdom. It is true that, if Wagner's operas were destroyed, Wagner's prose works would be unintelligible. But the difficulty of Wagner's prose works almost disappears if we read them as foot-notes and prefaces to his music-dramas. Wagner's prose works in every line and paragraph have a direct bearing upon his own practise. The vast and general statements which sprawl across his pages seemingly without system—statements which to the casual reader are formless and vague—become quite definite and clear when we remember that Wagner is writing, not a self-supporting thesis as he cunningly pretends, but an apt and strictly pertinent defence of some particular musical or literary habit of his own. Wagner in his writings upon Opera is vague and general, and leaves out all the instances which might clinch his propositions, because he is thinking always of his own works—of a passage in *Tristan* or *Siegfried*—and does not realise that the general reader is usually a less complete Wagnerian than Wagner. Besides, it would

hardly do for him systematically to lighten the obscurity of his philosophic apothegms with quotations from his own works. That would give away the very special character of his special pleading. Wagner liked to think that the world had waited centuries for his music dramas; that they were the fulfilment of a *primaeval* purpose; that they could be justified by the nature of things. For this reason he prefers to talk in the largest and most general terms without pettifogging references to texts and examples. These must be supplied by the reader; and, if the reader cannot supply them, the reader, more often than not, will be unable to form the least idea as to what Wagner is talking about.

This is as true of what Wagner has written concerning scenery and gesture in drama as of what he has written concerning music and speech. His metaphysics of scenery and gesture are unreadable till we remember what were Wagner's personal practises and prejudices in these matters. Unless we know what concrete thing it is which Wagner has in his mind, and wants to prove or defend, the statements and arguments of Wagner concerning scenery and gesture are like a game of chess for those who do not know the rules. If, however, we have learned the rules—if, that is, we read his philosophy of gesture from our knowledge of what Wagner liked to do with paint, cardboard and with the arms and legs of his singers—the game is plain enough.

We have to remember that Wagner yearned after the theatre long before he had learned to yearn after Beethoven. He started as a youthful writer of solemn tragedy. As a very young man he positively delighted in the smell and atmosphere of the stage. This first enthusiasm for things theatrical never left him. A childish pleasure in the daubs and haberdashery of the theatre lived on side by side with his mature passion for music and his quite respectable talent for verse.

A very striking and amusing instance of Wagner's delight in the mechanism of his stage and of the extremity of his anxiety that nothing should thwart his ingenious devices has just been offered us in the memoirs of Mme. Lilli Lehmann. Mme. Lehmann was dear to Wagner because she sang his music very beautifully and also sympathised with all his troubles as a stage manager. Wagner addresses her affectionately as "dear child" and "most excellent child." It is not surprising therefore that she is able to tell us some of those trivial things about her Master which are so important and precious to the biographer. One of her best pages relates how, when the Rhinemaidens at Bayreuth

first saw the perilous machine in which Wagner required them to simulate the movements of a mermaid, they were one and all seized with giddiness and dismay. Finally Riezl, "brave as death," climbed into the suspended belt, and showed that the thing could be done without loss of life. Mme. Lehmann shortly followed, and all was well. But it is Wagner we are watching; and of Wagner it is quite simply recorded that he shed tears of delight! He probably thought more of the Rhinemaidens' swimming machine than he did of their music. It all seems very childish to the artists and mechanics of the modern stages at Moscow or Berlin; but we need not be unduly sorry for Wagner's curious enthusiasm. It is true that Wagner's stage, on its mechanical and plastic side, is as bad as anything which the obliging Parisians perpetrated for Meyerbeer. On the other hand, if it had not been for Wagner's boyish enthusiasm for cardboard, dragons and toy castles, we should never have had the music-dramas at all. Wagner would have invented instead the symphonic poem, and have taken to himself the laurels which only after a generation we are now according to Liszt. We must take the cardboard, the paint, the limelight, and the stuffed birds of Wagner as an unfortunate but necessary part of the Wagnerian system; and we must never for a moment forget in reading "Opera and Drama," or in discussing Wagner's influence on modern operatic scenery, that in these matters Wagner was never more than a little boy at the pantomime.

But this little boy was able and ready to prove out of history and psychology and metaphysics and religion, not only that his cardboard was essential to Siegfried and Parsifal, but that Mozart and Shakespeare failed because they did not appreciate its necessity. This brings us to Wagner's formal theory of stage scenery, a thing, let us remember, not arising out of Wagner's contemplation of the nature of things, as he pretends, but simply invented to show that he was right, whereas Mozart and Shakespeare by no fault of their own were hopelessly wrong.

There are two important passages in the Third Part of "Opera and Drama" wherein Wagner philosophically justifies the apparatus of his stage. These passages are an excellent illustration of Wagner's method of stating, with the reader's interpretative and intelligent help, his own particular and personal fancies in terms of universal philosophy.

I may therefore the more readily be allowed here to state in the plainest possible English the position which Wagner ascribes to gesture and scenery in his dramas, even though this means

repeating much that is extremely familiar to musicians. We have in this case to begin with Wagner's original distinction between intellect and feeling. It is axiomatic with Wagner that word-speech appeals to the intellect. It can render only what is "utterable," which in Wagner's view means that it cannot render any of the precious things with which the highest art is concerned. Wagner usually thinks of art as appealing to intuitive feeling, as being concerned at its highest power with the "unutterable." For him there are two ways of transcending the utterable, and of speaking directly to the soul through the senses. The first is the way of tonal speech. The second is the way of gesture, gesture including of course the dramatic and visible conduct and relations of all the people of the play and the setting in which they move. Whereas the poet simply defines in intellectual terms the grooves in which feeling shall run, the musician in his verse-melody, or more completely, in his orchestra, communicates to the hearer all the unutterable implications of the poet's theme, while simultaneously there is communicated to the spectator's eye speechless messages corresponding with those he is receiving from the orchestra. It is not possible here to linger upon the thousand controversies this aesthetic system immediately raises. We are here only concerned to notice how high and important a function is assigned by Wagner to gesture and the scenic appeal. Virtually he puts the scenic artist and actor above the poet, for it is the scenic artist and actor, in equal alliance with the musician, who in Wagner's system is allowed to carry the poet's appeal beyond reach of the utterable. The poet speaks only to the intellect; the musician and the actor speak directly to the soul.

There are some astonishing inferences to be drawn from this. Wagner so extravagantly delighted in his castles and toy dragons that he was ready to sweep aside the dramas of Shakespeare as mere stumbling-blocks in the progress of humanity towards the "Ring of the Nibelungen." Shakespeare made no appeal to the physical eye; and would, as Wagner very rightly points out, have been horrified to see his plays presented as a stage pageant. Shakespeare, therefore, according to Wagner's theory, failed altogether to achieve the unutterable. His plays spoke neither to the ear nor to the eye. Mozart appealed only to the ear, the pantomime of his operas being insignificant and unrelated to his music. It was Wagner's special achievement—so he implies in his writings—to bring gesture into alliance with music, to be the first to run in leash the twin Pegasus destined to bear the modern tone-poet into the region where speech falters and is left behind.

It will perhaps be better, instead of setting out to show by theoretic argument the fallacies contained in Wagner's reasoning, to indicate how the modern tendency is to abandon his conception of opera as a union upon equal terms of the arts poetic, plastic and musical. Practise has destroyed his impracticable theory; and practise has had for an ally the jealous particularism of the artist, who naturally tends to rest his appeal as exclusively as possible upon the art to which he himself is devoted. The normal musician has none of Wagner's craving after theatrical brimstone, and he is seldom so constituted that his music must needs be fertilised by speech. Every experiment to combine the arts upon terms of equality has failed and was bound to fail. The theory happened to fit Wagner's own temperament and needs; but it was false to the psychology of normal musicians and the normal audience. Experiment has shown what common sense might clearly have predicted. The literary aspect of Wagner's theory we will for the moment leave on one side, though here the fallacies are most numerous and have been most completely exposed. We will deal primarily with Wagner's attempt to run in leash his twin appeal to feeling through the eye (gesture) and through the ear (music).

There are two ways of approaching the problem of the staging and playing of Opera. We may with Wagner regard gesture, action and scene as of parallel importance with the music, thus allowing the plastic appeal to assert itself, and to thrust itself upon the spectator. Or we may regard it as the function of the plastic and histrionic crafts of the theatre simply to frame, or at most decorate unobtrusively, the appeal of the music. We may take as particular instances of these two methods the Bay-reuth production of "Parsifal" and the Petrograd production of "Prince Igor." The comparison is possibly a little unfair to Wagner's method because "Parsifal" was almost in every detail of its presentation as repulsive an example of nineteenth century stagecraft as an opponent of Wagner's theory could wish to cite; whereas the decoration of "Prince Igor" was perfect in execution as in principle.

The distinction between "Prince Igor" and "Parsifal" is that in "Prince Igor" the decorators and actors aimed solely at framing the musician's appeal, whereas in "Parsifal" they are expressly commanded by Wagner to assist and to interpret the music. In "Prince Igor" the decorators and actors desired to be inconspicuous. Their object was not to interfere or distract. The eye was to be quietly satisfied, so that the ear might be

entirely free. In "Parsifal," on the other hand, the decorators and actors desired actively to intrude. The eye was to be forcibly arrested. An obvious bid for attention was continually urged. Let us examine these two methods a little more closely. "Prince Igor" for the moment we will put upon one side. We will consider first the case of "Parsifal" and its modern derivatives.

Wagner's idea was to produce, consonantly with his music, a lovely pageant in gesture and light and colour which should enhance and fortify the appeal of his music. Unfortunately Wagner had not the necessary gifts to carry out his own programme upon the plastic side. What he really does in "Parsifal" is to distract and distress the eye as continuously as he delights and satisfies the ear. It will be objected that the Bayreuth "Parsifal" does not prove that Wagner's theory is unworkable, but only that Wagner was unable to work it. This, for the moment, we allow. At the same time the believers in Wagner's theory can hardly claim that the failure of "Parsifal" is no argument whatever against the theory whereby the composer of "Parsifal" worked. The failure of "Parsifal" is practically inherent in the theory itself; for it witnesses conspicuously to the unlikelihood of ever finding Michael Angelo and Beethoven in one and the same artist. Even if it were desirable to make the simultaneous and perfect appeal to ear and eye at which Wagner was aiming, no one is less likely to be a competent painter and designer than the normal musician of genius. The musician of genius is usually the last person to have any real intimacy with the kindred arts. It is true that since Schumann and Berlioz started the literary or journalistic tradition among musicians, they have tended to expand in the direction of articulate speech—usually with rather unfortunate results. But musicians, normal and great, are usually deaf to the finer cadences of the poet and blind to the monstrous futility and ugliness of the old operatic stage. When the modern musician dabbles in philosophy, or humour, or the setting of scenes, he usually distresses those of his admirers who, though they are quite inferior musicians, understand these other matters rather well. Fortunately for the musician his audiences, which are musical, are not usually much more particular than he. Musical people are notoriously indifferent, not only to the highest appeals of the sculptor and painter, but even to the decent comeliness required by ordinary citizens in a family residence or bank buildings. The concert rooms in a town are usually places that seem deliberately to have been made as unpleasant to the eye as possible, as though the musician

pointedly required his audience to receive his impressions solely by means of the cortical cells. The mere fact that concerts and recitals continue to be given in such places shows plainly enough that, when the ear is busy, the eye can discreetly omit to be employed. There must clearly be something wrong with a theory which requires every musician to have a taste for colour and proportion when it is notorious that not one musician in ten thousand objects to hearing beautiful music in places as ugly as the palm court of a first-class hotel. So far as Wagner's theory is vitiated by the improbability of ever finding a musician-poet-architect to work it, "Parsifal" is a fair illustration of its weakness.

But we are not under any need to cling to "Parsifal" with its stuffed birds, "spot-limes" and transformation scenes to show that Wagner's theory is fallacious. In strict logic, "Parsifal" proves only that Wagner had not succeeded with his own system. He has not in the gesture and scenery of his theatre achieved high and unutterable things. He has not appealed in an equal degree to the ear and to the eye.

The question still remains. Can this system really be worked, and, if it were possible to work it, would it be worth while? It is more than a generation since Wagner wrote "Opera and Drama"—a generation of restless experiment and continuous improvement in the arts and crafts of the theatre. How has history itself answered Wagner's aspiration to see the appeal of music wedded with the appeal of the actor and scene-painter?

History has answered Wagner with a flat negative. Musicians seized on Wagner's great revolutionary idea, accepting his use of a drama or programme to shatter or to enlarge the old classical mould invented by the absolute musicians. But they utterly ignored all the rest. Music, having been as it were fertilised anew by a temporary union with the drama, sprang immediately away from its mate and followed the path of its own individual and specialised development. Musicians in a word turned from the Wagnerian music drama to the symphonic poem. Instead of running the twin appeal of eye and ear upon equal terms, they simply turned, as every artist in a special kind will turn, Wagner's new source of musical inspiration to purely musical purposes. They even removed Wagner's own operas from the stage to the concert room, and showed that in many ways they were the better for the change. Every party to the Wagnerian partnership behaved in exactly the same way. Wagner inspired them all to fresh efforts of discovery, but he did not inspire them to form a strict alliance. The scenic artist read "Opera and Drama," and

went off by himself to study a new art of the theatre in which he speedily forgot all about the musician. The dramatic poet read "Opera and Drama," and he, too, went off by himself to improve his poetry, quite undisturbed by any devouring wish to hear it sung to the accompaniment of a full orchestra. The musician read "Opera and Drama," and, despite the modern tendency to take him seriously as a poet and thinker, he continued to content himself with expressing his deepest feelings in music, with occasional relief for his literary yearnings in letters to the newspapers or occasional heavy jesting upon the margin of his scores. When he wanted to write an opera—that is to say, when in addition to the orchestra he required also the human voice and the chorus—he went to the poet for a libretto, as in the bad old days of Mozart and Beaumarchais. The poet being found in his own particular corner, the musician when he wanted to have his opera mounted and decorated, went to look for the decorator. So it finally happens that Richard Strauss to-day, so far from respecting Wagner's prophetic vision of the opera of the future as a blend of the arts, wisely allows Hofmannsthal and Bakst to do their share of the work each in his own way.

Wagner, in a word, has been unable to turn the arts from that path of specialisation and independence which is essential to their progress. Music, poetry, the dance (the dance is gesture in its purest form)—these arts may all touch and mutually inspire one another. It was Wagner's inspired mission to bring them into a momentary contact whence they severally derived fresh energy to pursue their individual ways. But after the moment of contact, progress could only be made by each turning again to work out its own salvation. The arts of the poet, the musician and the dancer have each a logic of their own. Only by freely and dissociately following the genius of its being can music attain to expressing the highest of which it is capable. This equally applies to the poet, whose limitation to the region of mere intellect was one of Wagner's crudest blunders—a blunder natural in a musician who had very little sense for the appeal of the greatest literature.

The way of specialisation has been taken as consistently by the dance or gesture (which is now more especially our subject) as by the other forms of art. The modern history of these several arts since Wagner wrote is admirably illustrated by the way in which gesture or dance has tended utterly to dissociate itself from opera and drama. Wagner's theory of gesture was that it began to attain to subtlety and deep significance in proportion as it became more firmly united with poetry and song. The pure

dance he describes as the most elementary form of gesture; and he regards it as the function of the poet and musician to carry it further and cause it expressively to convey to the eye the poet's story and the musician's feeling. Reduced to the strict and literal sense of plain terms Wagner puts pantomime—the gesture and play whereby his Siegfried or his Parsifal illustrate their authors' musical meaning—above the unfettered dance which exists solely for itself. The progress of the arts was, he asserted, to bring together drama and the dance. The pure dance he regarded as he regarded absolute music: it needed to be linked up with poetry and song to make it of supreme significance. The drama or programme was to vitalise the dance, and start it upon fresh paths in the same way as it had vitalised the absolute music of Beethoven.

Exactly the opposite of Wagner's prophecy has occurred. The trend of the modern dancer is towards a dissociation and specialising of his art. Like the musician he was inspired by the Wagnerian drama into a new field; but after the first inspiration he turned from the drama or pantomime and developed entirely along the lines of his own art. The history of the Russian ballet is the history of a gradual realisation that pantomime, far from enhancing the pure gesture of the dance by giving it a definite or programme significance, checked and thwarted its appeal at every turn. The pantomime ballet in which the Russian dancers have for many years most skilfully and faithfully persevered, has, regarded as gesture, proved at its best and loveliest to be little more than a *danse manqué*, or, regarded as drama, to be crude and confused. Accordingly the dancers of finest genius, notably M. Nijinski, have tended more and more to strike out the pantomime and to make the dance as absolute in its new, free, subtle forms as it was in the old days of the minuet or the gavotte. So far has the reaction gone against Wagner's desire to harness gesture to the musical poet's wheel that M. Nijinski has even smiled upon a suggestion made by me in the "Saturday Review" to take the purification of the dance a step further and to eliminate music, making the dance entirely self-sufficing and absolute. This, of course, is at this time impracticable. The dance is as yet in too elementary a stage. Its language is not yet sufficiently definite. We have nothing yet in the dance's appeal to the eye to correspond with the established conventions of music. There is no well-tempered clavier of the dance, no such traditional, immediate and intelligible appeal to the eye as is the appeal of music to the ear. Possibly the dance will never be able to

stand alone as a significant and satisfying art, such as is the art of the poet or the art of the musician. That is not the point of this present argument. The mere fact that such speculations are in the air is enough for our purpose. That the dancer, having as far as possible eliminated the poet, should dream also of eliminating the musician is proof enough, however impracticable the dream, that the present tendency is not towards, but away from, the union of the arts.

Perhaps an even more significant sign of the modern tendency towards specialising the arts is afforded in the career of Mr. Gordon Craig. Mr. Craig began with the Wagnerian vision; but he speedily found that a union of the arts in the theatre was a self-destructive idea. He started, as a producer, with a simple postulate: namely that a real significant union of the arts upon terms of equality was impossible if W. wrote a play, X. mounted it, Y. directed its gesture, Z. composed its incidental music. He therefore set out to discover a theatre wherein the producer of the art-work should be absolute master and sole executor in vision and craft. The long story of his pilgrimage cannot here be related. Suffice it that Mr. Gordon Craig, being by genius a draughtsman and designer, has found it necessary, in order to achieve unity in his theatre, actually to eliminate everyone else. First he eliminated the actor, whose caprice and mobility naturally defeated the fixed and absolute intentions of a producer who thinks almost exclusively in colour and line. In place of the actor Mr. Craig desired a super-doll, whose gestures could be strictly regulated. The super-doll could be made absolutely to conform with the beautiful in gesture without irrelevant intrusion of the purely human. Second, he eliminated the poet, on the ground that the plastic appeal of gesture—the language of pure rhythm in space towards which Mr. Craig is moving continually—has of itself significance enough to stand alone. Nothing now remains to Mr. Craig but music and gesture, music being overlooked merely because Mr. Craig, not being a musician, naturally regards it as no more than an insignificant accompaniment of the art in which he is primarily interested. Nothing could more clearly illustrate the modern tendency away from Wagner than this curious progress of Mr. Craig. He started with a firm belief in the union of the arts. He has instinctively arrived at a complete specialising of the one art for which he happens to have a natural genius. This progress is the more significant in that it was purely intuitive. Mr. Craig is quite unable to explain his own career. His writings purporting to do so are wholly mysterious; but his practise is clear enough.

Mr. Craig's reasoning was simple, and his conduct inevitable. The union of the arts needed in the arts united a master of them all. Therefore he turned in practise away from union, and towards a special cultivation of the art in which he himself excelled. But there was another and an opposite line of progress, the line taken by Professor Reinhardt and by the directors at Petrograd. This was to encourage each artist to develop on his own lines, and then to bring them into partnership when their work was done. Let Humperdinck and Vollmöller and Stein each work out their own particular salvation, and then let them be regimented by a producer who will reconcile their special claims to attention and employ one to enhance the other. Or let Rimsky-Korsakoff, Pushkin and Bakst be similarly organised, and put under a chief-of-staff who will regard their work from his own conception of the total effect required. Mr. Gordon Craig expressly mocks at this conception; and his logic in this respect is clear and unanswerable. Let us, however, persist in regarding practise rather than logic. How has this chief-of-staff conception worked? Does it actually in practise dodge the practicable impossibility of Wagner's demand that, in the hands of one supreme artist, gesture and music should be allied upon equal terms?

One of the most complete experiments yet made in this direction was recently afforded by the production in London of the "Coq d'Or." So perfect was this production that a musician might well have enjoyed it for the music alone; a connoisseur in costume and setting, who could not understand a note of music, might have delighted in the performance simply as a feast for the eye; a purely literary audience might well have rejoiced in the libretto, even though he resented its obscurity by music which for him had no appeal; and finally, a lover of dancing and eloquent gesture, might regard the whole production as designed solely for his own delight. Wagner's theory, found to be quite impracticable in the hands of one man, had here the best chance it will ever command of showing what it could achieve in the hands of half a dozen. Every difficulty of the Wagnerian system had been countered so far as organisation could counter it. Rimsky-Korsakoff had contributed his best music. The Russian soloists and chorus were picked musicians. The drama was good enough to live alone. The costumes of Mlle. Gontcharova would have adorned a public gallery. The mimicry and dancing were as good as Europe could supply. Each of these separate appeals of independent contributors had been skillfully induced to agree one with another; and the practical difficulty of combining

significant gesture with significant music had been solved by giving the music to one set of people and the gesture to another. Mme. Dobrowolska sang E in alt. while Mme. Karsavina danced accordingly. M. Basile Petroff, sitting at ease with nothing to interfere with the perfect delivery of his notes, was supported by M. Adolf Bolm in the centre of the stage, making his music simultaneously visible to the eye.

What was the effect of this perfect illustration of the Wagnerian theory? Virtually its effect was to disprove all that Wagner had assumed. We were able to feel, what might have been inferred from our experience of the working of the human mind, that the arts, far from reinforcing one another when allied upon equal terms, distracted the senses and confused the mind. The audience was in the position of a wireless receiver jammed by the simultaneous reception of several messages. The continuous and lively appeal to the eye had firmly to be put on one side if we needed to get the full effect of the appeal to the ear. The *theory* was that we were contemplating a work of art every part of which helped us to receive and to understand the whole. The *fact* was that we were really trying to contemplate several works of art at once, each speaking an idiom of its own and each claiming to be received. It did not relieve our distress and confusion of mind that each work of art was trying to say the same thing as its fellow. We merely knew that gesture and music, far from helping one another, got continually in one another's way. The happiest members of the audience were those to whom either the music or the gesture was secondary. Musicians who were blind to the gesture enjoyed the music, and choreographers who were deaf to the music enjoyed the gesture. Those who were more open to one appeal than the other either shut their eyes and opened their ears, or shut their ears and opened their eyes. Those in the audience who really suffered, and got little beyond a fidgetty sense of being continuously thwarted, were precisely those who realised that Wagner's theory of significant gesture and significant music allied upon equal terms was being illustrated in a thoroughly competent and admirable fashion. They soon concluded that either the music or the gesture was enough. Rimsky-Korsakoff expressed in his score all that he desired to express concerning King Dodon. It did not help us in the least that M. Bolm was repeating King Dodon for us in another medium. On the other hand if one attended to M. Bolm, Rimsky-Korsakoff became superfluous.

The strict inference of logic would be to abolish opera, and song, and dancing to music—a aesthetic appeal which requires

an alliance of the arts. But strict logic as usual leads us headlong into absurdity. The failure of the "Coq d'Or" to create in us a united and simple appeal does not mean that one art cannot come to terms with another. Otherwise we should have to regard most of the great music of the world as a great mistake. The fallacy which destroyed the "Coq d'Or" as a united work of art—which destroys also the fallacy of the Wagnerian system—is contained in a clause we have hitherto overlooked. An alliance of the arts is not only possible; it is approved by the sense and the need of all mankind, which has always insisted that words should go with music and music with the dance. The thing which is impossible is, not a union of the arts, but a union of the arts *on equal terms*.

This brings us back to "Prince Igor." Borodin's Opera was produced on the assumption that, when music is in the ascendant, it is the duty of the subsidiary arts to be unobtrusive. It is impossible to attend with an equal concentration to half a dozen appeals at once; but, once we are clear that the main appeal is to be a musical appeal, we are well able to allow the allies of music to assure us that all is well. It would be wrong to say that the other arts do not matter at all so long as the music is divine and well rendered. This would be preaching to operatic producers an extreme doctrine of dinginess and squalor. But we must be quite clear that it is not the business of scenery and gesture in opera to compete with the music—to insist upon an independent appeal in its own idiom—but merely to decorate it. In place of the alliance upon equal terms, we must have an alliance in which one art or another is supreme. If the finer appeal belongs to the music, the rest must be no more than decoration. Otherwise we are simply setting up side by side two or more works of art, each claiming to be heard in a language of its own, each appealing to separate senses in the individual, and, in practise, each appealing in different relative degrees to different members of the audience.

Philosophic or psychological justification of the truth of the decorative principle is hardly needed, for this truth has been justified by the tendency of modern practise in all the arts of the theatre. It is illustrated, not only in opera, but in the production of poetic drama. Wagner's theories have had a deep influence, outside music, upon many people who would not dream of affiliating their conduct to his teaching. His elevation of the arts, which in the theatre should normally be decorative, into an alliance upon equal terms with music and song started our producers of Shakespeare upon a false pilgrimage, which for a generation has made of the poet a mannequin for theatrical haberdashers. Wagner himself

would have warned them against this foolish blunder; for, though Wagner thought Shakespeare was wrong in appealing only by the spoken word, he had had sense enough as an artist and a logician to perceive that Shakespeare's plays aim always at the mind's eye and cannot be translated into light and cardboard without being virtually destroyed. But the absurdity which Wagner saw in the particular case of Shakespeare was inherent in his theory, and the late revolt against the absurdity of the particular case has coincided with a tacit confutation of the Wagnerian system. This is seen in two conspicuous and divergent examples. First there is the case of men like Professor Reinhardt and Mr. Granville Barker, who have realised that Shakespeare can only make his full appeal as a poet when his poetry is unencumbered. These producers have reduced the art of presenting Shakespeare to the art of decorating him; and are gradually coming to realize that, the simpler and more conventional the decoration, the more effectively Shakespeare is able to speak to the imagination. The cumbrous machinery of the theatres of Sir Henry Irving, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson and Sir Herbert Tree—machinery which frequently stopped the poet's mouth in order to appeal to the spectator's eye—is now discarded wherever the theatre is in living contact with the time. The second proof, by instance, of this tendency towards a submission of the subsidiary art as opposed to a mutual interpretation in alliance, is the inverted example, already described, of Mr. Gordon Craig. He aimed, on the Wagnerian principle, at interpreting Shakespeare afresh in line and colour—at conducting an appeal to the eye, parallel to and of equal importance with, the poet's appeal. He found this unworkable. He found that the double appeal could not be simultaneously achieved, and was not worth achieving. Either Gordon Craig or Shakespeare was superfluous. Mr. Gordon Craig accordingly dispensed with Shakespeare.

Modern practise and common sense alike go to show that the instinct is not wholly wrong which has prompted audiences to overlook the fact that the finest songs of the world are not necessarily composed to the finest language. Here, again, we see an illustration of our theory of decoration. Our theory would prompt us to deplore a very bad libretto, not because we actually require inspired dramatic poetry to run parallel with inspired music, but simply because we ask not to be made excessively aware of the dramatic poetry. If a libretto is utter nonsense, its absurdity will call for our attention and rebuke; and this is as calamitous, but not more calamitous, than execrable scene painting or ridiculous acting. All these things, if they are excessively foolish, tawdry,

or commonplace, clamour to be noticed. Just as "Parsifal" is spoiled by childish theatrical devices, so "The Magic Flute" is spoiled by its childish libretto. This, however, does not mean that we require the painting and the poetry to be magnificently inspired. We do not hunger for an alliance of the arts upon equal terms; but we do desire that the music shall not be hampered and interrupted. The practical needs of the average audience are satisfied when one art is admittedly supreme, and the others are competently unobtrusive.

This is exactly what the history and psychology of art would seem to require. History shows that, though the arts begin together, and are ready to come into touch at many points of their career, yet each art requires solitude and freedom for its own special development. The poet, elaborating his own subtle and particular appeal, writes of

"Magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas in fairylands forlorn."

To the appeal of such immortal syllables music can add nothing. It can only destroy or confuse their beauty. It is a blunder to take great poetry as the raw stuff of a song—as great a blunder as it would be for a poet to write words between the staves of a great symphony. The musician who would set Keats's "Nightingale" to music is inviting all who have a sense of literature to note that he has destroyed the rhythms and echoes of a perfect ode before they are able to note that he has, or has not, put in their place a musical appeal of an equal quality. If his music is as beautiful as the poetry of Keats, he demands of us that we should forget Keats before we can attend to his own achievement. If, on the other hand, his music is inferior music, we simply realise that the poetry of Keats has been unnecessarily spoiled. We cannot simultaneously receive upon equal terms an equally supreme appeal presented in different languages and introducing a wholly distinct set of values for our appreciation. Music, poetry and the dance were children together, and may yet unbend together. But their finer secrets are secrets from one another. At a hint from the poet or the sculptor the musician may start off into a world of his own; but neither the sculptor nor the poet can follow him into its inmost recesses. Similarly the musician may inspire the poet. All the arts may exchange texts one with another, and all the arts may draw upon nature, the same eternal nature, for their matter. The poet may write of music, the musician may

render again the landscape which the painter has set upon his canvas. But the way of each art is none the less lonely: there can be nothing either parallel or simultaneous in their diverse appeals.

Curiously enough the fact which so decisively proves the self-sufficiency and loneliness of the several arts is precisely that which tempted the Wagnerian to aspire towards their union—namely the fact that many great musicians have been utterly blind to things like literature or dramatic logic. The spectacle of mighty Beethoven taxing himself to find music for a tenth-rate melodrama, the cool disregard of the Italians for anything but the music of their operas, the cheerful respect of Mozart for dramatic material which to-day would hardly be thought adequate to the needs of a modern *révue*—these things pained a generation of musicians who also were literary smatterers; and they were ready to tumble into the opposite extreme of error. It is undoubtedly a mistake to take nonsense for a libretto, because, even when the musical sense is held and satisfied, the nonsense will annoy those portions of the mind which are less actively engaged. In the same way it is a mistake to stage or to act opera with an utter disregard of what will or will not offend the eye, because it will spoil and distract our reception of the music if the eye is rudely hurt. This does not, however, imply either that Goethe would be a good librettist for a musician, or that cartoons by Raphael would add a jot to the pleasure we derive from “The Magic Flute.”

Happily the present generation of producers and actors of opera have begun to realise this. Ironically enough Wagner's own dramas have helped to disprove the theory of the triple and perfect appeal. Wagner's success rests, indeed, on the failure of his dramas to conform to his own exacting formula. They succeed, not because they appeal to us in many ways, but because they appeal to us only in one way. They are not instances of a triple alliance between the arts upon equal terms. They are instances of a supreme musical appeal, less impeded by literary and dramatic absurdity than the majority of operas of the past. Wagner's verse has no independent appeal of its own. It contains no fine literary values to be superseded or marred by being constrained to observe the logic and spirit of a musical idea. Wagner's verse is just good enough to serve as a hint or foundation for his music. It never interferes with the music by asking for special attention. No one would dream of attending the Ring cycle for the sake of the drama. As in all successful alliances of the arts there is no

possibility of distraction or doubt as to the idiom in which the supreme message is being delivered.

It is even more true of the Wagnerian stage that no one would dream of neglecting a bar of the music for the sake of the gesture by which Wagner set such store. Wagner's stage hitherto has worried very few of his admirers because the plastic arts of the stage have till lately hardly existed at all. More will be heard of it in the future; for the problem already arises as to how it can be made inoffensive enough to avoid spoiling the music by its intrusion. The very nature of the problem shows to what ruin the Wagner theory has been brought. Our aspiration to-day is not to improve Wagner's theatre on the plastic side till we are able to set up an appeal to the eye on a level with his mighty music. Our problem is simply to improve Wagner's theatre, if possible, out of sight and mind. We know now that the art of staging a masterpiece in music, like the art of staging a masterpiece in poetry, is the art of being inconspicuous. We have to find a way of decorating Wagner as we have begun to decorate Shakespeare. Similarly, just as we are learning that Shakespeare's supreme magic has to be uttered and not acted—that, because he was a dramatic poet, a beautiful delivery of his verse is the essential thing to achieve—so we are learning that Wagner's supreme magic has to be sung. The acting, so long as it is not urgently and noticeably exaggerated or irrelevant, can very well be left to look after itself. We shall continue to teach our operatic singers to act. But we shall also counsel them, when it comes to the point, to forget all about their acting.